

Guiding Principles

After carefully studying child development theory and research⁴ in the course of developing the Widely Held Expectations and teaching strategies in this book, the committee developed these guiding principles regarding how children learn and grow. They serve as an excellent guide for using this document.

Each child is unique.

How a child develops results from a combination of factors, such as the characteristics they are born with, the culture they live in, and their experiences within their family and in other settings such as preschool. Even though the Widely Held Expectations describe “standards” for what children should be learning during preschool, the way each child’s development unfolds will vary greatly.

Development occurs in predictable patterns.

Even though each child is unique, development typically unfolds in progressive and predictable steps or stages. What varies tremendously from one child to another is when and how children achieve various developmental milestones. These differences are associated with individual temperament, learning characteristics, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family culture, and genetic make-up. Children with disabilities may exhibit even greater variation in the achievement of developmental milestones. The Widely Held Expectations are based on our best knowledge of how children develop, with the understanding that these are broad descriptions and that children will vary.

⁴ See Bibliography, *Child Development*

Preschool-age children are active learners.

Children need hands-on learning experiences to develop the skills and knowledge described in the Widely Held Expectations. They learn by doing, and they need time to practice what they are learning, to ask questions, to investigate, and to use what they are learning in their everyday activities.

Many factors influence a child's development.

Children's growth and learning are greatly impacted by their physical environment, relationships with family members and others, and the community and culture in which they live. These factors are different for all children and will shape their view of the world and how they develop.

Children with disabilities learn best in inclusive settings.

Children with disabilities will make progress on the skills and characteristics described in the Widely Held Expectations, although with great variation in how. They will make the most progress developmentally, socially, and academically when appropriate special education services are provided in inclusive settings. Just as the Widely Held Expectations are inclusive of all young learners, so should early childhood programs be. Children with and without disabilities learn from one another in natural environments. A curriculum and classroom tailored to meet the needs of individual children meet the needs of all.⁵

⁵ See Bibliography, *Diversity and Inclusion*



Diversity in Languages and Cultures

The Widely Held Expectations are a foundation for the instruction of all preschool-age children in North Carolina. Our state is comprised of people representing a wide array of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and the number of families – and preschool children – who do not speak English as their primary language is growing. This diversity is something to celebrate because families from different backgrounds bring a wealth of strengths, knowledge, and values to the preschool classroom.

In the development of this book, the committee carefully considered the types of support that could most benefit young English language learners. Classrooms that include children from diverse cultures and with different home languages should be guided by these six principles.⁶

- Having children from families with diverse cultural and language backgrounds is a valuable asset to preschool programs.
- Children's learning is affected by their language and cultural background.
- Preschool classrooms should strive to promote understanding and respect for different cultures and languages.

- Children whose home language is not English learn best when early educators encourage them to continue to speak their home language while learning English.
- Families who speak a language other than English should be encouraged to continue to speak to their child in their native language, even while the child is learning English.
- As children learn English, they go through predictable stages, much like a baby learning to talk. Educators should expect wide variation in how they make progress on learning English and on the skills and characteristics described in the Widely Held Expectations.

It Takes Everyone Working Together

Early educators play a significant role in supporting children's growth and development, and so do families, program administrators, policymakers, and community members. The involvement of parents, principals, directors, funders, and others interested in the welfare of young children is essential to support children's development.

The Role of Families

Families are the first and most consistent teachers children experience in their lives. Early educators can use the Widely Held Expectations as a common starting point for working with families – to help them understand and support age-appropriate goals for their children that can be shared between home and school. Children will make the most progress when early educators and families work together. Therefore, each of the developmental domains in this book includes strategies specifically written for parents.

⁶ See Bibliography, *Diversity and Inclusion*

The Contribution of Administrators

Principals and program directors are the instructional leaders of their schools and early childhood programs. They influence the resources available for early childhood education and the attitudes and practices of the persons working directly with children. In their positions, these leaders can have great impact on the implementation and success of the Widely Held Expectations – primarily by clearly communicating their commitment to them and to early education programs; by ensuring that these expectations are understood by teachers and used consistently and appropriately; and by providing professional development relevant to early educators. Children who participate in quality preschool programs have less need for specialized interventions and are less likely to be retained in later grades.⁷ Therefore, making early preschool services a high priority makes sense.

The Support of Policymakers and the Community

Policymakers and community leaders can fill a vital role in supporting the development of young children by taking the lead in educating the public about high-quality early education and promoting the use of the Widely Held Expectations. This could take the form of soliciting input on early childhood policies and programs, advocating for funding, and promoting collaboration and cooperation among agencies and organizations that serve young children and their families.

⁷ See Bibliography, *Early Intervention*